Elton John: Just trying to find something different

Extra-ordinary Elton John talks to Valerie Mabbs

THERE was a time when young Reg Dwight lived in Pinner and just dreamed about being a part of that big music industry. Piano lessons at an early age got him off on to the right foot, and then after signing up to DJM Records, with songwriting partner Bernie Taupin, Elton John (as he became) began appearing in the "right" places hoping to further his cause.

At an Edward Woodward reception some years ago, Elton persuaded me to hear some of his tapes — and very good they were, too. He's come a long way since then, and now it's my turn to be standing outside — at the front door of his imposing home on a secluded estate in Virginia Water.

Inside a hoover is roaring, then as the bell rings the sound stops, and Elton's mum is opening the door. She's been clearing up the debris following a hectic party which Elton hosted — to follow on to the New Year party held by Donovan at his nearby home.

Elton lists as his other "neighbours", Keith Moon and Chris Squire who's just moved in a short distance away. The whole atmosphere of Elton's home is luxurious — And somewhat bizarre.

'Everybody lives here'

"I love it here," he says. "I've got so much stuff that I could never get into a flat like I had before. It's so peaceful, and everybody lives round here!"

Usually Elton doesn't manage to spend much time at home, but since sufferring from glandular fever and having completed an incredible eight worldwide tours the previous year, during 1972 he has managed to relax a little more.

"We did a three week college tour of America to break Davey Johnstone in, then a big one at the end of the year. One tour of America a year is enough, that's about all you can take.

"I'd rather get it all over with in one go — not that I don't enjoy working there — but it's better than breaking it up into parts. The Moodies go over every year for their annual visit, and that's really ideal."

Elton is currently planning a lengthy tour of England — about 30 dates in all — and is having no trouble planning venues.

Covering the country

"I want to get back to the Locarno Streathams and the Basildon Gilderdromes," he explains. "There are loads of places to play that would be a good laugh. There are no 10,000-seaters, but you can cover the country quite well."

For his American tour Elton carefully planned his show to include a tap dance to Singing In The Rain, featuring himself, Legs Larry and 10 lovely ladies known as the Rockettes! And the whole show was choreographed by Debbie Reynolds' choreographer.

"We had to do it right," says Elton. "You couldn't have 10 girls coming on kicking their legs up in any way. Larry and I kicked along with them, and the kids lapped it all up. I think it would definitely work in England because people's sense of humour here is better than in America."

But we won't be seeing the Rockettes or Larry on Elton's next tour, because Larry is busy forming his own group, and Elton is more intent on presenting his next album, Don't Shoot Me I'm Only The Piano Player, to the British public.

The album was recorded at Strawberry studios and features a song I Want To Be A Teenage Idol, dedicated to Marc Bolan — "he likes it" — and a very moving number, Have Mercy On The Criminal, as well as Elton's next single, Daniel, due for release at the end of this month.

"I don't want to get into the syndrome of releasing too many albums a year," Elton told me. "And Honky is still selling well in the States. But everyone wanted this album to be out before Christmas, and that would be a terrible mistake.

"James Taylor, Carole King, Neil Young, all the Warner Brothers lot have albums out . . . 700 albums this week, folks. It's the same with the single, Dick James thinks it will be bad for my career to put it out."

But Elton says the release will be January 12 — and he's banking his hopes on the single which is a complete contrast to Honky Cat. His own contract with DJM is set to run another two years, but Elton is forming his own Rocket Records company for the benefit of other artists. Offices have already been set up in Wardour Street, and business affairs will be handled by Elton's manager John Reid, with help of various kinds from Steve Brown and Stuart Apps, previously of DJM.

"I'd like to get a great reggae album out on the label and to find a good soul act," Elton told me. "What we want to do basically is to get a better deal for the artist . . . instead of two percent over the first per cent years with three successful albums. We're all brought down with big system companies. WEA may seem hip and groovy, but they're into parking lots and shoes.

"The Beatles got ripped off for masses and masses. They were the innovators of the demand for a high royalty rate; a new group from Clapham want 50,000 dollars advance and they've got a good chance of getting it now, but that would never have happened then.

Black and white

"Everyone's learned by their mistakes. They started Apple and we learnt from it because where they went wrong is written down in black and white." (Elton was referring to Peter McCabe and Robert Schonfeld's Apple To The Core).

Elton is still basically the shy person he has always been, but now he enjoys mixing with other musicians. Marc Bolan is a good friend — though Elton hasn't yet seen him work — and Elton spent an afternoon in the studio to record his section for Born to Boogie.

"I had a good time," he told me. "When we did Children Of The Revolution in the studio it was so good, but it couldn't go out as a single because it was over seven minutes long."

Elton also became friendly with David Cassidy in America.

"He's so fed up with what he's doing," he told me. "He gets up at six every morning of the year, does the Partridge Family, then he's recording. He's trying to break away. I remember when he made Rock Me Baby he was all pleased with that."

Keeping in touch

David, says Elton, is "so sweet". He'll be playing piano for David at his Wembley concert, if that's possible. In fact Elton keeps very much in touch with pop's happenings. He laughs at the fact that Radio One banned Hi Hi Hi, but play Lou Reed's Walk On The Wild Side . . . and bemoans the lack of support given to Colin Blunstone's I Don't Believe In Miracles.

"How didn't that record make it," he wonders. "I can't believe that wasn't a big hit. I would have put £100 on that record being a top five."

Which highlights just how strange this old business can be.

"I like to send it all up," says Elton. "I like to wear outrageous things. I started that about three years ago, but I shudder to think what I looked like! I got knocked for it then, but a lot of people have come along and done the same things since, and people have become so much more colourful. Now I'm just trying to find something a little bit different."

In search of the extraordinary undoubtedly some more success and luxury to boot!